

FEATURE

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POPULATION ON THE MOVE

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Since the beginning of time man has been a wanderer, and his migrations have resulted in the population of entire continents. Every year, economic difficulties or political upheavals set hundreds of thousands -- even millions -- of people in movement. But these migrations are not simply a matter of chance: they are closely linked to a country's position in the world economic order.

Many countries act as labour pools for other more industrialized nations. In West Africa, the most striking example of population exchanges between countries is found in Upper Volta, which supplies tens of thousands of workers to the coffee and cocoa plantations of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. The contribution of migrants from Upper Volta to the economies of these two countries is so great that when Ghana forced foreign workers to leave in 1970, agricultural production, particularly that of cocoa, dropped markedly. The impact would probably be even greater in the Ivory Coast, where migrant workers represent about two-thirds of all agricultural wage earners.

Migrations are by no means new in Upper Volta, but until recently no national survey had ever been carried out to provide a comprehensive, detailed picture of population movements. This picture has recently been traced by a team from the Upper Volta Centre for Scientific Research (CVRS) and the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (INSD) of Upper Volta, jointly funded by the government of Upper Volta and Canada's International Development Research Centre.

The National Survey of Migratory Movements in Upper Volta 1974-1975 was conducted in 120 villages and 11 towns across the entire country, covering female and male, national, and international migrations. For the purposes of the study the country was divided into four areas: the rural Mossi country (about half the region around Ouagadougou); the rural west; nine secondary towns; and the two major cities of Ouagadougou, the capital, and Bobo-Dioulasso, the economic centre.

The analysis of the data collected quickly confirmed the magnitude of the migrations in Upper Volta. The strongest migratory flow -- 205 000 migrations -- was from the Mossi country to the Ivory Coast. For the first time an accurate measurement was made of the large migratory countercurrent (150 000 migrations) from the Ivory Coast to the rural areas of Upper Volta, the Mossi area in particular. Lastly, the researchers confirmed that the Mossi area also lost in its exchanges within the country as it was the major source of the 100 000 movements towards the rural west.

The survey team was able to identify two distinct migratory groups, one male and the other female. The movements between rural areas are in fact predominantly female: within the Mossi area, three times more women than men migrate. The international exchanges, on the other hand, are dominated by men in a ratio of four to one. Most emigrants abroad are young men, and many of them return while they are still young.

Some 22 percent of the population surveyed were found to have migrated at least once, and half of these at least twice. On average, almost half of the population in urban areas is made up of migrants (56 percent in Ouagadougou). Also, even though the Mossi and non-Mossi rural areas have approximately the same proportion of nonmigrants (80 percent), the Mossi country has twice as many returned migrants (15 percent) as the rural west.

The survey team identified four major types of migrations. First is the employment migration of young bachelors who leave work as wage earners for a time, and then return to their villages to work the land. Next there is a large marriage migration of single women who leave to carry out their productive and reproductive roles in another village as a result of unions between families of the same ethnic origin: more than 80 percent of the women gave marriage as the reason for their migration. A third type of migration, education migration, explains the movement of a growing number of young boys and girls as school attendance in Upper Volta increases. Lastly, the national survey confirmed the existence of a sizable migration of children between the ages of 5 and 14 given into the care of other families, either to perform for the "adoptive" family certain household tasks traditionally reserved for children in that age group, or because there are no schools in their villages.

The main reason prompting the migrants to leave their villages is the desire to enter the "moneyed" sector of the economy in order to obtain the cash necessary for the purchase of certain goods.

But why is it, the survey team wondered, that in the same family and the same village some people migrate and others do not? The explanation is to be found in the individual's position in the extended family. Ultimately it is the family that sends off some of its members and keeps others to tend the fields and see to the needs of those who remain.

For Upper Voltans migration is not a good thing, but it must be tolerated. The authors summarize: "the people feel that migration is inevitable and necessary because the government does not have other means to meet the needs of the population".

What steps must the government take to discourage migration? The first suggested by those interviewed is the creation of remunerative jobs to provide people with the means to buy manufactured goods. The second, to help farmers by facilitating the purchase of agricultural equipment and fertilizer, by drilling wells, by improving the roads leading to markets, and by guaranteeing good prices for agricultural products.

But as the survey team discovered, the glory that surrounds the returning migrant on his moped, resplendent in his new clothes and jewelry, quickly disappears. Usually, a few days after his return, the "prodigal son" finds that his meagre capital has been distributed as gifts to family and friends. He has little choice but to return to working the land, as if he had never left. Life in the village is no way transformed by the influx of thousands of young men who have experienced life outside.

The government of Upper Volta and family members working in towns are presently the only sources of productive investments in the rural areas. If the returned migrant does not make similar contributions to rural production, it is perhaps because working in a large plantation or factory is poor preparation for becoming a successful small farmer.

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